DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 018 HE 000 367

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Problems of the Minority Student on the Campus.

Association of American Colleges, Washington, D.C.

Pub Date 15 Jan 69

Note-5p.; Paper presented to the 55th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 15, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35

Descriptors-*Higher Education, Human Relations, *Minority Role, *Negro Students, Negro Youth, Race Relations, *Racial Attitudes, *Racial Discrimination, Social Influences, Social Structure

The problems of the black student on campus are not new. He has had to accept, at the level of consciousness, the ideals and values of US society while actually being continuously rejected by the same society through various forms of discrimination. He has had to organize his life in recognition of the fact that structured racism within US society denies him of many opportunities to participate in it as a full-fledged citizen. On the basis of his personal experience it has been difficult to differentiate whether white acceptance is based on his true personality or on assumptions that he has "stereotyped" Negro habits, feelings and attitudes. He experiences an inner struggle concerning which of 2 roles to play, one that is expected of him and another that is his natural self, for whites who fail to understand what it really means to be a Negro in US society. At much loss to his psychological stability, he has suppressed this conflice in the past and accepted a role that fits into the societal structure. Today's black students, suffering from this imposed inner torment of choosing between personal dignity through conscious role-playing or through effecting a change in society to improve actual experience, have decided on the latter and are rejecting education which does not relate to their individual development as citizens and as human beings. Their demands for a share in an array of college decisions reflect a search for self-identity that is not "programmed" or expected by white society, but one that is individually and naturally developed. (WM)

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55th Annual Meeting
Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Analyst's Paper for
Discussion Group II
Wednesday
January 15, 1969
9:00 a. m.

Group II: Problems of the Minority Student on the Campus

By

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I could say that the "problems of the minority student on the campus" are a reflection and a function of the "problems of the minority student in the society in general." Then I could specify some of the actual campus problems. We could discuss them, then all take off and do something more interesting, perhaps. But I understand you want me to say something about the subject that is meaningful and relevant.

Permit me, then, to go back ten years ago. The year before I had graduated with an M.A. degree. After graduation a friend, who is white and the president of a Chicago publishing firm, offered me a position as a minor executive with his company. One day he said to me. "Al, you know what? I am convinced that white America, for the first time in the history of the country, is ready to both listen and respond to what it hears about what it <u>really</u> means to be a Negro in our society. I think <u>you</u> should write that article. I would, if I could."

After another conversation with my white friend and employer, I wrote an article and showed it to him. He, after reading my article, stared at me and started tearing it up, saying as he did so, "Al, I never doubted that you were a good social scientist. But your research paper which I'm tearing up could have been written by any social scientist, or even by me. So, you have not written the essay that only <u>you</u>--or some other equally articulate Negro could write."

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I mention this incident for three reasons, which taken together indicate some of the characteristics about our society in general and black and white assumptions and experiences that are bound to be reflected in our educational institutions. Thereby, they are bound to complicate the life of the "black minority student on the campus."

When, to my face, my white friend and employer tore up my article my reaction was a concentration of embarrassment, pain and anger. The reasons why I had this cluster of reactions would take too long to explain fully here. Besides, what at that time I became slowly conscious of was that my white friend-employer was dead earnest about the kind of story that only I or some other articulate Negro could write. And most importantly I began to dread the prospects of writing such a story. For what my friend was asking me was no less than to explain what it meant to be black for 26 years--all of my life--as a citizen of the United States, as an American.

Well, I had spent my life trying so hard to be an unqualified American. To write about being a Negro in America with any modicum of honesty and sincerity meant to write about the events in my life, how these events and encounters were internalized as experiences, and how to interpret these experiences in terms of my status in American society, in terms of relations with others and in terms of my own self-identification. Every black American whose writing contains any of these ingredients of his experience is bound to arrive at at least two similarly significant but intimately related conclusions, even before he starts writing. The first is that he himself and black Americans in general live in a society whose very intent and structure is to deny him the opportunity to share in those goods and to participate in those achievements without which the black citizen cannot fully feel, cannot fully experience what it means to be an American. Secondly, this very recognition intensifies the sentiments of embarrassment, pain and rage. Which is the meaning behind the statement which James Baldwin makes in one of his books--to wit, to be black and relatively conscious in this country means to be in a state of rage most of the time.

The point of all this--as it will be with my next two points--is that an understanding of the structure of American society in terms of its impact on the black student, and the now conscious and deliberate intention of the black to effect a change in the society is the critical basis for trying to understand the limited, however serious, "problems of the black minority on the campus." I am not at all convinced that the princes and princesses of education understand that.

My overwhelming sense of being personally challenged by my white friend-employer's reaction to my first article obviated any need for his usual tactical harassment to get me to write the second. I wrote it. My white friend read it. From his office I could hear him exclaim his approval. I titled the article "Nigger in the North"--the publishers changed it to "Negro in the North"--and sold it to a national Catholic publication. Remember, that was ten years ago.

Here are a few of the things I said: I had noted that if the black person ventures outside of the black ghetto he immediately faces a variety of forms of discrimination all or any of which he experiences as a rejection. So I wrote that "the fact of rejection had been such a common fact of my experience that I am compelled to organize my entire life in recognition of that stark fact." Which means "embarrassment, anxiety, anguish, at times a feeling of abandonment. It means that I am condemned to live in a world of mental torment, occasioned by uncertainty and doubt. Uncertainty and doubt even in circumstances where it seems I am accepted on the basis of equality with white persons."

At another point I discussed the difficulty sometimes in knowing "whether a white friend accepts me or a stereotype." On the basis of my experiences alone "I am forced to think that you expect Negroes to have attitudes, habits, and feelings different from your own and that I, being a Negro, will both exhibit and interpret them. I can refuse compliance with your expectations only at the risk of physical extinction or psychological disintegration. So I conform; but in doing so, I have become afflicted with a dual role and correspondingly, a kind of dual personality--struggling between the compulsion to react as you have conditioned me while stifling the desire and need to respond naturally. Out of this clash of roles arises my torment . . . The cruel dilemma is that sometimes I actually don't know when I am playing a role and when I am being my natural self. IT'S LIKE BEING SMOTHERED. I WANT TO HOLLER!"

Later in the article I observed that American ideals and the means for achieving them are so effectively foreclosed to the overwhelming majority of Negroes, even Negroes of great ambition and capability, that "Negroes generally, seldom can fully appreciate white persons' complaints about not being able to make ends meet, about their lack of satisfactory employment or financial difficulties, difficulties in locating a home, an apartment--indeed difficulties of almost any kind. . . the world is literally theirs."

"But for me," I concluded, "the world is hardly more than a dream. All that prevents it from being a dream purely and simply is <u>hope</u>--<u>hope that the snail pace advancement toward total equality of opportunity for all will be accelerated</u>. For I do not believe that my children will be either willing or able to endure that sense of inner panic and awful abandonment that gnaws at my soul. <u>They will not merely want to holler, they will</u>! <u>Loudly</u>!" (Italics added.)

I resurrected these selections from a decade-old article for two reasons. The first is that they are the parts of the article that resulted in great disquiet to some of my white friends when they read it.

This was deeply personal with them. They wondered about the quality of their relationship with me. Was it really friendship? Or did I really include them among those "white friends" whose friendship with me was that of a white person to a black stereotype? They were really troubled by the article.

But you see, what really bothered my white friends was the sinking feeling that all the important assumptions about the world and this country that gave substance and meaning to their lives were in fact no part of the assumptions--or if part of the assumptions--then no part of the experience of their black friend. On the contrary, not only were our assumptions and experiences different. More than that, my very life (not livelihood) depended upon recognizing this fact and adjusting my life accordingly. All of a sudden, they were struck, it seems, with the realization that I knew all about them and they nothing about me, because they knew nothing about the single most important societal influence in my life--the inordinate and structured racism of American society.

My white friends who responded to the article are all liberals--and I don't mean this pejoratively. Some of them are today important persons in higher educational institutions. For the generation over 30 they represent the white <u>avant-garde</u> in attitudes about race relations in education and in the country as a whole. The near-tragedy is that they know so very little about the realities of the lives of those students whose increasing numbers are throwing a dark shadow across the white campus. Thus the black minority on the predominantly white campus is condemned to encounter problems not encountered by his white counterpart even if all the blacks were friends of both white students and white administrators, and even if all white students and administrators were liberals.

And this is related to the second reason why I resurrected my old article of 10 years ago. As my previous excerpts clearly indicate, when I was a student I consciously accepted the ideals of American society, the validity of the institutions through which American ideals were to be formulated and the traditional democratic procedures for converting proposals into policy. That is to say that <u>at the level of consciousness</u> I believed in the ideals of equality and liberty, the relevance of American political and social and religious institutions in formulating and sustaining these values, and trust in the democratic process for making the ideals concretely achievable. Again, that was at the level of <u>consciousness</u>. But it was not, as indicated by the excerpts from my article, in accordance with my <u>experience</u>. But since part of my behavior must be in accord with the values and expectations of the dominant society and part in accord with actual experience I must end up afflicted with a conflict at the very core of my life--<u>a societally "programmed" conflict</u>. Quite literally, this conflict "programmed" by

the process of white acculturation of the American black will send you stark raving mad unless one of two things happens to the black. Either he challenges the white society's structured "programming" of him and thereby risks physical suicide, or he suppresses the conflict, thus inviting psychological suicide. Blacks have done both, obviously more the latter than the former, up to and including my generation.

But this is now all over. Blacks can no longer bear, are no longer accepting as compatible with personal dignity an experienced duality at the center of their lives. In a very real sense all the problems of the black students and many of those of white students and administrators flow from this fact. Because I think the crucial issue for the black student is the consciousness that he is involved in a search for <u>who he is</u>--<u>a consciousness of a search for identity</u>. But the dominant characteristic of education, its very structure and prosecution assumes for the student body as a whole what is <u>self-consciously open-ended for blacks</u>. Accordingly, he cannot accept the whole panoply of contemporary education.

And he could not accept it even if white administrators accepted all of his demands <u>but one</u>. And from a procedural point of view that <u>one</u> entails all the others. It is none other than <u>a demand for a share in the decisions</u> about college life, college rules, college curricula --<u>even college administration</u>! Only then will he be in a position to maximize the possibility that what he learns is relevant to his experience and his aspirations, that his education is <u>not</u> starkly contradicted by his life.

That's all I have to say, really. If I have not dealt with such administrative headaches as black-white room mates, Afro-American history courses, black demands for separate housing, college entrance deficiencies and the like, the reason--if it is not now clear--is simple. A person who is self-consciously in search of his life, especially if he is equally <u>self-conscious</u> of having been denied his life, <u>cannot</u> know in advance of tomorrow what problems he will either present or confront. Moreover, and just as importantly, a person in conscious search of himself cannot solve any problems consistent with that consciousness unless he has a share in its resolution.

I thank you for listening.